

Relationship Between Singers and Conductors

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(This article originally appeared in OPERA America's Singer Career Network newsletter, *Voices*, Volume 7. Number 3. Winter 2005)

The relationship between a singer and a conductor is one of the most important in a singer's career, and also one that takes a bit of thought and preparation. This process is not without its challenges, but through relying on a bit of common sense (and at times a good sense of humor), you will almost always find your way down the right path. Following are some considerations as you begin to negotiate your way.

Always come prepared. This is the most important point of all. No conductor, director, coach, or colleagues will take you seriously, have interest in what you have to say, or really be excited about collaborating with you, if you don't have your act together musically. You may have an awesome voice along with great musical or dramatic instincts, but if you can't back it up with solid preparation, your voice had better be more than first class, or you will quickly become, as they say in the recent popular TV game show, "the weakest link."

When you arrive on the scene for the first music rehearsal, thorough preparation also means going far beyond merely knowing your words and music. Dig down to the punctuation, remembering that how you approach or inflect commas, question marks, exclamation points, and the like does affect how interestingly you communicate what you sing. Strive to always "say" the text, and not merely "pronounce" it. Know what everyone else is saying, and in addition, what the orchestra is doing. This is really what sets apart those artists that are really in control. One expects that the conductor know the entire score, so why not expect it of an excellent singer as well?

For singers that are well prepared, there will be occasions when the conductor might not be as prepared as one



Stephen Steiner. Photo by Ken Howard.

would like, or might not have a feel for text. On these occasions you can be proud of your level of preparation and delight in the knowledge that you might even be teaching the conductor a thing or two!

Don't tell them how you want it to go — *show them*. Once you have successfully prepared your role, there really shouldn't be a lot of need for discussing or defending your interpretation. We've all seen situations in which a singer decides to spend an inordinate amount of time telling a conductor how this coach or that coach, this conductor or that one,

has told them how something is supposed to go. If you are that singer, it's most unfortunate for you in this situation, since it's not really important anymore — it's now *your* performance. Once, I encountered a singer that had worked with a number of coaches and conductors, dutifully marking in the score with different colors to indicate a different person's thoughts. When it was time to work, this poor singer could never decide which color scheme to sing when, and you can only imagine how uninteresting the singing was.

You will always be taken more seriously if you sing with conviction and commit to an interpretation with a point of view in terms of tempi and characterization. I can't tell you how many times, while playing auditions or working with a singer, that a singer took absolutely no lead in the performance, afterwards mentioning that they thought things went too quickly or too slowly. Remember, when collaborating with pianists or conductors, if you don't perform it how *you* would like it to go, they will always take control and show you how *they* think it should go.

The same goes for the singer who feels a strong desire to give an explanation for every bad note or mistake. Everyone makes mistakes, feels moments of insecurity, or has a bad day. Fight the temptation to make too much of these, lest the explanations start to smell like excuses and become a nuisance, not only to the conductor, but to everyone else around you.

Sing with rhythm. Some may feel that this sounds a bit too simple or that this is inherent in good preparation, but there are quite a few situations when a conductor muses, “if only such and such sang with rhythm ...” This goes for all singers, and for aspiring singers in particular. Singing with rhythm will always strengthen your relationship with a conductor: It puts conductors at ease and gives them confidence that you will be with them throughout a performance and not wandering around on either side of the beat for the good part of an evening. Conductors will, again, be more inclined to take you seriously — to view you as “musician” and not merely as a “singer”.

In any business, effective communication and people skills are just about as important as the other skills that you develop, including vocal, linguistic, and dramatic skills. As I mentioned earlier, remembering to clearly *show* a conductor how you intend the music should go, as opposed to *telling* them, helps very much. What *doesn't* help, especially in a Sitzprobe or other orchestra rehearsal, is to snap your fingers, tap your foot, or otherwise noticeably move your body to show your discontent at how things are going. Always remember that a conductor's goal, like yours, is to give a first-rate performance.

Most singers I've known are always wonderfully supportive, hard working, and a lot of fun to be around, but every once in a while you come across one who's a real pain in the neck and tends to bring down the whole spirit of a production. Treating your colleagues, conductors included, as you'd like to be treated will always have the most rewarding payoff.

Being an opera singer is extremely complex, but singers must also respect the fact that being a conductor comes with its own set of challenges. After you've worked through a solid rehearsal period, remember that once the conductor is in front of the orchestra, a much bigger part of their attention must focus on the players. That will take some getting used to by a more inexperienced singer, but remember that, at this point, strong support from the orchestra will only enhance your ability to give your strongest performance.

You must always keep in mind that this business is smaller than you can imagine, so even in the worst of situations, avoid burning any bridges. The key to a successful career is to encourage as many people as possible to want to continue hearing you as well as

working with you. Always be careful not to create a situation in which you will be viewed in a bad light or get a bad reputation.

How about when the conductor and stage director don't agree, or when other artists in the production have an uncomfortable interaction? Luckily, this doesn't happen very often, but when it does, my advice is: Stay neutral, maintain the integrity of your own work, and let them take care of business. If things get out of hand, however, one must assume that the appropriate individual from the company administration will keep watch over the situation and will intercede if necessary.

There will be many times when you will have the great fortune of working with what is known as a “singer's conductor,” a conductor who not only makes wonderful music with the orchestra, but also is attuned to what the singer is doing, breathes with the singer at every step along the way, and chooses tempi that enable a singer to do his or her best work.

At other times, you will not be so lucky. A conductor I once assisted made the comment that *Così fan tutte* would be a wonderful piece of music if only it didn't have any vocal parts in it. Boy, do you know you're in trouble then! Again, at that point, it's best to grin and bear it and make the best of the situation, remembering that there are plenty of fine conductors out there who will make most of your experiences absolutely positive ones.

The longer you are in this business, the more opportunities you will have to perform the same role with different conductors. Every musician has a different take on a piece of music, and that's what makes being a part of this art form so interesting, exciting, and rewarding. This also means that you must be open to these differences and not lose yourself in integrating the new ideas of a different conductor with your existing interpretation. Be willing to try things differently or to see things in a new light. It may or may not ultimately work in the new way, but your willingness to try and your ability to clearly show how it may or may not work will show you as a true collaborator and make working with you that much more attractive.

When you are faced with differences of opinion, just remember to keep a cool head, have confidence in the fact that you are well prepared, know why you've made the choices you've made, sing with conviction, and remember that you're all in this process of creating the best performance together. It sounds easy on paper, but after a bit of experience, you'll start to find your way to strong alliances with conductors as well as the many other individuals you will encounter in this business. And don't forget to try to have a good time while you're at it. ♦